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ABSTRACT

The history of filmmaking in China and Japan and film usage in teaching are considered in this document. Pointing out how films describe historical context and culture, the document also describes various techniques of film making. Films in China were heavily influenced by western models and have tended to be tools of the power structure, as reflected by the Goumindang government, which enacted strict censorship laws in 1930 preventing the release of films that were: (1) critical of the regime, (2) dealt with the war with Japan, or (3) presented unfavorable social realities. Currently, there is a movement toward artistic freedom within strict limits. The film industry in Japan, thriving since the early 1900s, experienced the artistic growth of Japanese films as a result of freedom from corresponding restrictions imposed by the war. Japanese films are divided into two categories: (1) contemporary life films; and (2) period films. An overview of the films of five influential Japanese film makers and a brief list of their films is provided. There are numerous Chinese films available for rent and a brief description of five classic films made between 1937 and 1969 is included. Descriptions of films available for classroom use are included. (NL)

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FILMS: CHINA AND JAPAN

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Moving pictures came to China shortly after they were invented, but it has only been since 1949 that they have become mass entertainment. Before 1949, the exhibition of movies was generally confined to treaty ports or their riverine hinterlands. The majority of the movies shown were foreign films; in 1919, 90% of the films shown in Shanghai were American made, and in the late 40s, 75% of all movies shown were of foreign origin.

Foreign influence was also very strong among the Chinese film makers. These people, as were their audience, were westernized intelligensia somewhat isolated from the rest of Chinese society. Early Chinese films reflect this.

Films into the 1920s were generally realistic. Newsreels were important and fiction film stories were slices of life. In the late 20s, the film industry began to turn to classical novels and stories, Peking opera, and folklore for story lines. The most popular type of film to develop at this time was the Chinese version of the American western - the gongfu movie - which always remained popular with Chinese audiences outside of the PRC and which are again being shown to enthusiastic audiences on the mainland.

In 1930, the Guomindang government, which had succeeded in bringing north and central China (including Shanghai, the movie center of China) under its control, passed a censorship law whose objective was political - to prevent the release of films which the government felt threatened its position. Taboo subjects were the war against the Japanese (which the government did not acknowledge from 1931 to 1937) or films which dealt with the Chinese reality (the government interpreted films which focused on existing social and economic inequities as criticism of its regime). Leftist film makers used a variety of ploys to circumvent government censorship. Movie plots that dealt directly with any social theme were narrowly drawn and it was left to the audience to draw the intended meaning. At times censors were bribed to let things pass.

The Japanese war pretty much shut down the film industry. Between 1945 and the founding of the PRC, films were again made, but under the same censorship conditions that had existed in the 30s.

Unlike the KMT, the CCP which came to power in 1949 had a clear vision of what function the performing arts should play in society. The arts should assist in the process of educating the masses. They should be used for "propoganda" and inspiration. There was a real attempt to set up a socialist film industry to replace the inherited industry which was heavily dependent on the west for materials, techniques, and stories. Film imports were restricted to those from socialist countries.

Between 1949 and the early 1960s, Chinese films still reflected western influences. One of issues of the Cultural Revolution was the question of national style in the arts. The leaders of the CR attempted to create a new type of fiction film heavily influenced by traditional operatic conventions while demanding that film serve the purposes of those in power. While the battle raged over what this new form should look like, fiction film production was halted for three years (1966-1969). When film making resumed, theatrical

works, the medium in which the ideological and cultural battle had been solved, were filmed.

Theater and films of this period are clearly identifiable. The plots are meant to inspire and glorify the "heroic" struggle of the "people", and the characters are presented as totally good or totally evil. Traditional themes and stories were discarded as "feudal." The productions incorporated western ballet and techniques from traditional Chinese opera in which character is clearly marked for the audience by costume, makeup, and gestures. The actions of a character within the piece is never a surprise. Characters remain fixed and unchanged.

It has only been in the past few years that there are indications that the Chinese film industry is moving away from these stereotyped presentations and beginning to deal with the realities of Chinese life in a realistic manner. The government also seems very uncertain about these films, unsure what is realism and what is criticism of the government.

There are a number of Chinese films available in the United States. Many local Asian grocery stores rent videos. Some films may also be obtained from China Video Movies, P.O. Box 51710, Palo Alto, 94303. The following are some classic films which could be used in the classroom.

Street Angel (1937). Life in prewar Shanghai. The tragicomedy of five men who try to help two sisters, forced by their "adoptive" parents into a life of prostitution.

The Spring River Flows East (1947) Charts the political, spiritual, and moral decline of an idealistic and patriotic school teacher from 1931 to 1947. The story is a metaphor of the director's feelings about the Nationalist government.

The Adventures of Sanmao (Three Hairs) (1949). Satire based on a popular comic strip character of the 1940s. An expose of the life of the poor in treaty-port China. Could be used in the classroom along with a published book of translated Sanmao cartoons, see reference below.

The White-Haired Girl (1950). First revolutionary opera filmed. Story based on a traditional folk story. Has many characteristics of films from the CR, but it has more appeal.

The East is Red (1969). The history of the Chinese revolution as a ballet/opera. An example of pure, revolutionary, socialist art from the CR.

References: Zhang Leping, Adventures of Sanmao the Orphan. Hong Kong: Joint Publishing Co, 1981.

Leyda, Jay, Dianying: An Account of Films and the Film Audience in China. 1972.

Clark, Paul, "Film-making in China: From the Cultural Revolution to 1981", China Quarterly 1983, 304-323.

Moving pictures became enormously popular with the Japanese as soon as they were introduced in 1897, and the first Japanese-produced film was being shown to Japanese audiences within two years. The early films, domestic and foreign, were shown with a narrator providing explanation of the story. Even after movies became better at showing the story through pictures, the narrator or benshi remained, in many instances more of a draw for the audience that were the actors or stories. The audience demand for benshi performance lasted well after the introduction of sound in movies.

Many of the recognized Japanese film styles were developed during the 1920s and matured during the 1930s, the first Golden Age of Japanese cinema. The Japanese characterize all films by genre which are further subdivided by

type. The largest division is between the period film and the film about contemporary life. The period film, a genre that was important into the 1960s, is set in pre-modern Japan, usually the Tokugawa period, and the content is usually drawn from traditional stories well known to the Japanese audience. The most well-known type of period film is the samurai movie, most of which deal with the struggle between obligation and human feelings. No matter how the director chooses to portray this struggle, the conventions of this genre insist on the respectability of the hero and a nihilistic attitude toward society as a whole. The hero is everything. Anything he does is perfectly proper as long as he lives up to his obligations, is brave, and meets death unflinchingly. Not surprisingly, these films contain much violence and death. The Occupation government objected to period films because they were perceived as extolling feudal, and therefore anti-democratic, values and therefore this type of film was not allowed to be made. The Occupation would allow gangster films to be made and these became a very popular kind of film. Today, the period film is of little importance, with the occasional exception of an historical epic, and the gangster film seems to have been replaced by detective films.

Films of contemporary life are also subdivided into types. There are mother films, with their theme of the sufferings of mother for husband and/or children. Usually there is no escaped for mother; she must sacrifice and suffer. Since W.W.II, with the American emphasis on the individual, there has developed a category of films focusing on wives as individuals and not as members of the family. Neither of these types of films are as important as they once were in the 50s and 60s. Today films focus on the lives of teenagers.

The 1950s are considered the second Golden Age of Japanese films, a time when the industry freed itself of the restraints placed on it first during the war and then by the Occupation. The film industry saw another decline in the 1970s, in part generated by the development of television. In a somewhat successful attempt to maintain a movie audience, the industry has turned heavily into the production of soft-core pornography, and it is estimated that close to half the films produced these days fall into this category.

Japan has produced some first-class directors whose works are among the finest in the world. The following list does not name all the directors who deserve to be recognized nor does it list all the superb films of the directors listed. The works listed, however, should be relatively easy to obtain with English subtitles. One source is Tamarrelle's International Films, 110 Cohasset Stage Road, Chico, CA 95926.

It would be impossible to comment on all the films or to provide plots. Many of the books listed in the reference section will provide that information. There are also a number of books, which are not listed, available on the market dealing with one director and his work.

Kenji Mizoguchi. Many of his films are concerned with the plight of women. Sisters of the Gion (1939), Story of the Last Crysanthemum (1939), Sansho the Bailiff (1954), Ugetsu Monogatari (1953), A Tale of Chikamatsu (1954), Life of Oharu (1952).

Yasujiro Ozu. Only did comtemporary stories which focused on families rather than the characters as members of society. More interested in character development that in plot movement. I Was Born, But... (1949), Late Spring (1951), Early Summer (1951), Tokyo Story (1953), Equinox Flower (1958), Ohayo (1959), Autumn Afternoon (1962).

Akira Kurosawa. Probably more important in the west than he is in Japan. Seven Samurai (1954) - an excellent period piece which faithfully depicts the Sengoku period and samurai ethics. Long, but captures the attention of

teenagers. Rashamon (1950), Ikiru (1952), Throne of Blood (1957), Sanjura (1962).

Nagaisa Oshima. Probably the most difficult films for westerners to understand. Boy (1969), Death by Hanging (1968), Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence (1983).

Masaki Kobayashi. The Human Condition (1959-1961). Trilogy with an anti-war theme. Harakiri, a samurai movie which deals with the deteriorating conditions of samurai life in the late Tokugawa and the conflict between samurai values and what many samurai needed to do in order to survive.

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Audie Bock, Japanese Film Directors. (paper) Tokyo: Kodansha, 1985.

Tadao Sato, Currents in Japanese Cinema. Tokyo: Kodansha, 1982.

Peter Grilli, ed., Japan in Film. New York, 1984.

Joseph I. Anderson and Donald Richie, The Japanese Film. Princeton, 1982.

The Asian Cinema Studies Society is a newly formed organization which is dedicated to the advancement of Asian film and media scholarship. They will publish a newletter twice yearly. To join, send dues to David Desser, ACSS Treasurer, 2090 FLB, 707 S. Mathews, University of Illinois, Urbana, IL 61801. Dues are $8 per year, students $5, and institutions $15.

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